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ABSTRACT

The development of a composition segment in a course in English as a second language for graduate students in a Chinese technological university is described. The approach used in tailoring the program to student needs and university requirements under the severe constraints of scheduling and available resources is discussed. Letters to the teachers required of each student during the first class period revealed student motivations, expectations, and perceived needs that were very different from national and institutional requirements. Initial writing assignments uncovered instructional needs in the areas of organization, sentence and composition length, sentence structure, and vocabulary and usage. The available instructional materials were found to be inadequate, and the course's goals were found to be ambitious. The instructional model adopted consisted of 3-week cycles in which students learned about different types of writing and practiced them in a sequence of guided and free writing assignments. A central tool used in instruction was the journal in which students practiced writing and communicated with the teacher. The course has been successful and will be continued, with some changes. (MSE)

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Designing a Composition Program for Graduate Students at a University of Technology in China

by Nancy V. Lee

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It is risky to generalize on the basis of one experience. Yet reports from teachers at other higher educational institutions in China have indicated that some of the constraints under which the six of us western teachers taught this composition course for graduate students were not unusual. Further, coming as they did to our school--the Northeast University of Technology in the city of Shenyang--from all parts of China, our students undoubtedly represented the English language capabilities and needs characteristic of both graduates and undergraduates in non-English majors across the country. The questions we asked, the answers we heard, and the solutions we found may, therefore, be relevant beyond the boundaries of this one campus in northeastern China.

Returning there in the fall of 1987 after an absence of six years, I discovered that both the city and the university had changed. Shenyang, a heavy industry city about eleven and a half hours north of Beijing by train, now had a population of more than four million. Some of the main streets had wide new bicycle lanes; huge department stores were springing up ; and the lights of a tall TV and restaurant tower blinked among the stars at night. On the campus of the university, a new square four-story cream-colored library filled almost a whole block; and nearby a modern-looking computer

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science building was almost finished. More new apartments were being completed for faculty families, also--although insufficient housing for faculty and students continued to hamper the growth of the university, which now had a student-faculty ratio of 6.9 to 1. One of a small group of national key universities in China, Northeast University of Technology continued to be a research institution with a student body of about 12,000, of whom 2,000 were graduate students. All had been admitted on the basis of their high scores on the national university entrance exam.

Although the 360 first-year graduate students enrolled in the English composition course had converged at NEUT from many different provinces, they were generally alike in two ways: (1) they had learned some English previously, but because they had been working--usually in some kind of technological job--for a few years since graduating from college, they had not been exposed to a formal study of English recently; and (2) they all carried a heavy load of class hours, of which six were, during this first year, English: two double class periods (50 minutes each) of reading--intensive and extensive reading--and one double period of what was called Listening Comprehension and Composition. It was this last course that was assigned to the six of us western teachers and that I found myself directing.

The central question was this: how could these 360 beginning graduate students, who lived in a non-English-speaking country, improve both their composition and listening comprehension skills in just one 100-minute class per week in only 12 weeks? The miracle needed to happen for them in spite of their diverse levels of English ability and their heavy load of other courses. And the miracle needed to happen under the guidance of

earnest but mostly untrained, inexperienced (in the area of college composition teaching) young American and Canadian teachers, one of whom was a college senior in an undergraduate exchange program from an American university.

Appointed to engineer this miracle, I posed additional questions. What did the students think they needed? What were the university and departmental objectives for the course? What did the students' classroom performance and writing show they needed? What kinds of teaching material were available? Could anything be done to lighten the load of the American college student, who had been assigned six of the twelve sections to teach?

It was clear from the beginning that the felt needs and motivation of these graduate students were somewhat different from the realities imposed by both the national ministry and the university. The letters that we teachers asked our students to write during the first class period (to introduce themselves to us and tell us about their views of the course) included comments about the long-range value of knowing English. A few of the students wrote about wanting to learn English well enough to be able to study abroad. Several wanted to communicate better with western teachers and visitors, and one hoped to improve his ability to understand the Voice of America. Some asked for more information about the United States. One saw English as part of his preparation to become a professor, and another, also looking ahead, wanted to learn enough English to be ready to use imported equipment, more of which he expected to arrive in China in the future. Only one voiced what was surely uppermost in the minds of all: "If I

will fail the exam, I will be very sad, my teacher will be angry with me, my mother and father will be to. I make up my mind to study English carefully. Please you believe me."

Most of the students, however, focused less on *why* they were happy to be in the course and more on *what* they needed to learn. Almost unanimously, they said they needed to improve both their listening and speaking skills. Only a few mentioned writing, seemingly unaware that half of the course was to center on composition!

The title of the course was undoubtedly misleading: "Listening Comprehension and Composition." The first term was clear, but how the word *composition* fit into the picture was apparently puzzling. Obviously many of the students would have preferred to substitute *conversation* for *composition*, and perhaps they had, indeed, confused the two terms. At any rate, we could help them improve their listening comprehension, and we were going to lead them into the joys of composition; but the university and departmental objectives did not leave enough time for us to satisfy all of the wishes of the students. We could not focus on the desired introduction to American culture, though quite a bit filtered in as we raced through Joan Morley's (1972) *Improving Aural Comprehension* material and also worked on the rhetorical aspects of composition from a western perspective. Nor were we to offer a speaking course--though there were some natural opportunities for the students and teachers to talk together as we practiced the Morley material. Instead, the university expected us to emphasize listening and composition skills so that these graduate students could meet the foreign language requirements mandated by the ministry in Beijing: for

M.A. students, passing one foreign language proficiency test; for Ph.D. students, passing two foreign language proficiency tests. Students taking these exams had to answer structure and reading comprehension questions, pass a listening comprehension test, translate a short passage from Chinese, and write a short essay.

It was important, then, to find out not only what the students thought they needed, but also what they could and could not control in listening comprehension and composition. We soon agreed with the students about their needing help with listening comprehension; indeed, it was obvious that most of them needed far more listening practice than we could give them in one hour a week. While there seemed to be no way, at this point in the semester, to reserve time in the laboratory facilities on campus or to set up even a simple listening program for out-of-class hours in an empty room, the students could, we were told, have tapes copied, and many had acquired or could get their own tape players. Thus we could and did assign listening material for 30 minutes of private practice each day five days a week.

Reading their first papers, we made additional discoveries. The first was in the area of organization. Carolyn Matalene, in her (1985) article, "Contrastive Rhetoric: An American Writing Teacher in China," has explained some of the differences she found in the ways Chinese and Western students arrange their material. In comparing the work of her English majors with what we saw in the papers of our science students, we concluded that our students seemed less familiar than hers with organizing strategies from either a western or a Chinese perspective. Writing in a loosely inductive way, they clearly preferred to round off their paragraphs

or papers with a conclusion rather than announce it at the beginning; thus the thesis-support paradigm felt awkward to them. Sometimes they wrote in a conversational way with little selectivity, as in the example below. Here the assignment asked the students to start with this incomplete "seed" (Ponsot and Deen, 1982) sentence: "A feeling of _____ swept through me as I stepped inside the _____." The beginning of the paragraph below, however, provides a narrational setting that has nothing to do with the feeling named by the student in the seed sentence although his later idea of unrealized expectation would have certainly been worth developing .

> It was a weekend again. I had no idea about what I would do. So I rode my bicycle wandering the street of the city, it is alway my purposeless fun. Suddenly, a tall, big new buiding caught into my eyes. It must have been a supermarket, how beautiful. I stoped my bicycle and lock it quickly, went straight the door as fast as I could, I wanted to find some precious things with which I spend the rest of weekend. A feeling of disappointment swept through me as I stepped inside the shop. How awful and a mess, a few worker was working there. The room is full of disorder shelf. wodd strip etc. unpleasant smeling like petrol. rush my nose. I realized this build hadn't completed. Then I went out of the build as fast as I came in, and made for my bicycle.

In addition, the students clearly felt that moving far beyond the production of a string of short, simple sentences would take them into deep water. A comparison of twenty of the short letters written the first day in class with the final examination essays written by the same students in the same amount of time yields these median figures. The median number of simple sentences per *letter* was 9; the median number of simple sentences per *final test essay* was only 4. The median number of complex sentences

(here very loosely and generously defined not only as the traditional complex sentence but also as any sentence with reduced clauses and even compound elements) per *letter* was 6; the median number of complex sentences per *final test essay* had risen dramatically to 14. The letters included such sentence sequences as these: "My name is Zuo Yu Jun. I'm twenty-one this year. I'm studying mining engineering speciality now." The same student wrote these sentence sequences in his final essay:

"One day when I entered into the store of NUT, a government store, I found that the saleswoman who I would ask her to help was speaking loudly to another one. Although I asked her to help for several times, she still pay no attention to me.... The private store, which is beside our dormitory, impresses me well. One day I bought some goods there, but my money is not enough. At this time, the saleswoman said to me smiling: 'You bring me the money after days.'"

Also, as the above examples show, the students were not fully at home in English structure or the lexicon. An examination of just one set of papers from one section written early in the semester reveals problems in the following categories. (Speakers and students of Mandarin Chinese will recognize the "interference" in many of the examples below. Some of the problems, especially those having to do with verbs, seem due, however, to the complexity of the English forms and choices.)

1. Verb forms and tense errors

I was *look* forward to the game.

I almost didn't *heard* him.

I *'m* like to study there.

The old buildings *were disappear.*

I *am* eager to see it earlier.

In the summer holidays of this year I *has been* there.

When I stepped inside the door, I saw many boys and girls *had been* there. (According to the context, the boys and girls were still there.)

2. Subject-verb agreement errors

A tower sit...

People is...

There is two floors...

The buildings is...

A river run through it...

3. Missing plural inflections

eight dish

many book

two place

some vegetable

(In addition, quantifying forms were problems, as in "many knowledges," "a little trees," and "much dishes.")

4. Frequent confusion among the personal pronouns, particularly in the students' spoken English.

5. Missing words

<u>Verbs and auxiliaries</u>

A small river around the village.

There hills blue and water beautiful.

When the sun down...

They fishing, rowing on the lake and playing many

kinds of games.

Relative pronouns

Some classmates of mine had come earlier rushed into the room.

Prepositions and verb particles

Listening their teacher...

When I stepped the ground...

Looking flowers is my hobby.

When I arrived the railway station...

Articles

6. Word forms (These gave the students endless difficulty.)

a dust desk

a pleasuring color

a twist path

The smelling was delicious, and all the meat dishes were attempting.

Because of comfortable and silence...

What a crowded!

7. Word choices. We noted that word choice errors appeared somewhat less frequently than word form errors, and the choices were often logical in some way. For example, in an effort to provide a suitable ending for his descriptive paragraph about a special meal, a student wrote a final sentence that looked strange but was really quite understandable. The problem lay in the student's handling of a special idiom. The first sentence, given as the seed sentence of the assignment, was "I could not take my eyes

off the table." Not wanting to repeat this sentence word for word at the end of his paragraph, the student simply tried this paraphrase: "So I saw the table not off." Other examples include the following.

There are two rooms *else* which students can use.

The room might *obtain* 30 students.

We need these materials *anxiously.*

8. Punctuation and spelling. The students sprinkled a mark of punctuation liberally throughout their first papers that was unfamiliar to their western teachers. It was a small, light dot, which was neither a period nor a comma, but which seemed to function as sometimes one and sometimes the other. (It can be seen in the paragraph quoted earlier.) Spelling was a severe problem for many of the students. This one set of papers contained over 60 different errors in spelling, not including the plural inflection or other word form errors. Nouns and verbs were the most frequently misspelled parts of speech. Of the 60 errors, 27 were misspelled nouns, and 19 were misspelled verbs. The irregular verb forms of such verbs as *teach, blow, write, begin,* and *feel* were often misspelled, as were the pronouns *they, them,* and *their.*

After finding out what the students wanted, what the objectives of the university were, and what the students' writing, listening, and also speaking showed they needed, I looked at the textbook material that was available. We could use Joan Morley's (1972) *Improving Aural Comprehension* with some supplementary material, particularly in dialogs, for the listening half of the course. The only composition material, however, consisted of a few questions and directions at the end of each chapter in one of the reading

textbooks that would be used by the Chinese English faculty who were teaching the reading classes. Most of these composition instructions required only copying material from the reading passages and thus taught very little about the composing process. Therefore, I requested permission to develop my own composition teaching material, which would be based on the students' demonstrated needs and would be coordinated with Joan Morley's listening comprehension units, as far as possible. The English department not only agreed to this request, but also took care of the logistics of getting the material typed on stencils and copies mimeographed--not a simple task for 360 students and their teachers. It was , then, the program that I wrote from week to week that the team of composition teachers decided to use as we worked to help our students become more competent writers of English paragraphs and essays.

I also asked the last question that I posed above--about whether a way could be found to lighten the load of the American college student who had been assigned six sections to teach. The answer here was *no* for three reasons. First, the idea that I had suggested of asking Chinese professors to join our team and take some of the sections was vetoed because they had already been assigned their courses for the semester. (Getting acquainted with our reading teacher colleagues, however, was seen to be a fine idea; we were welcome to visit their classes, and they visited ours.) It was further explained that Chinese teachers did not feel comfortable marking English compositions. And, finally, we were all assured that we need not mark more than ten compositions in any class set; instead, we were to use these ten compositions to help all of the students improve their writing. The American

college student did survive; and, while he did not mark as many of his students' papers as the rest of us did, he conscientiously read all of them and marked quite a few, especially near the end of the course.

Incidentally, the choice of the term *mark* is deliberate. We did not need to put *grades* on any of the students' compositions or homework. The reason was that each student's grade for the whole program of intensive reading, extensive reading, listening comprehension, composition, and translation would be based solely on the final course examination. Actually, I found that not needing to determine grades facilitated my assuming the role of a support person, not a judge, who was helping her students improve their writing and listening skills for both their present and future needs. (It was interesting to observe, however, that some of the teachers felt compelled to devise their own grading systems.) What I did plan for the team of teachers were essay evaluation sessions, using a check list so that we would be setting common objectives for our students and would also have common criteria at the end of the course on which to base our wholistic grading of the examination essays, which we did together. Our evaluation guide for the final essays appears in the Appendix. Readers of *Teaching ESL Composition: Principles and Techniques* by Jane B. Hughey, et. al. (1987) will see categories similar to those in the ESL composition profile there but with different definitions.

Our goals for the students were perhaps too ambitious, even though they were graduate students and had passed a placement exam given by the department earlier. We wanted to teach them just about everything, as our course description noted: "the writing strategies of discovery, prolific

writing, organization, and rewriting in relation to audience, purpose, and logic." Since we had been told to require four papers for the semester--five from the students in the three advanced sections--we would limit the content to "writing situations requiring illustration, process analysis, comparison/contrast, and cause/effect analysis." We did add a week on reason plus examples, however. And we would place responsibility on the students to improve their control of English grammar and usage and to work on achieving "greater cohesion, emphasis, and variety in the formation of their sentences."

The simplest aspect of our program was its three-week cycle. The first week we presented one type of writing or organization; the second week the students practiced this type of writing in an in-class paragraph or essay; and the third week we marked and returned these in-class papers, commenting on them and reading examples of strong ones. We also asked, somewhat unsuccessfully, for revision of these papers.

Obviously, as with the listening comprehension component, we could not hope to see much progress in the students' writing if the students limited their study and practice to the one 50-minute period per week. Something else very soon became the heart of the course, something that started out as an ordinary journal but, because of the writing needs that we observed in our students' work, quickly became a two-part program: (1) a model for analysis, imitation and guidance (D'Angelo, 1988, describes the use of models with native speakers for analysis, and close and loose imitation; and Raimes, 1983, pp. 50--67 and 115--138, explains ways to use readings and models with ESL/EFL students) of the type of writing being studied, along with

instruction and classroom exercises and (2) a series of daily assignments, which were, because of the students' heavy course loads, to require no more than 30 minutes to complete. I designed the daily tasks in weekly sequences of *controlled* and *guided writing* (Raimes, 1983, pp. 6--7; 95--114, distinguishes helpfully between the two kinds of composing) to *free-writing* (here defined, not as in Raimes, 1983, p. 7, as writing without form but as composing according to the student's own plan); thus, all of the students could succeed at something and the better language students, while having a chance to review, would be challenged. In addition, the assignment sheets contained exercises based on the students' previous writing, with examples often drawn directly from the students' work. As the semester proceeded, a typical sequence of assignments would include (1) work with the model--an outline, an imitation from an opposite point of view, expansion with examples, as illustrated below with the "Not Recommended" exercise, etc., (2) syntax and grammar exercises--such as sentence combination tasks or the editing of examples from the students' papers, (3) word form, spelling, and vocabulary exercises, (4) the development of an outline for a paragraph or an essay in the type of writing illustrated by the model, and (5) the writing of a paragraph or essay based on the outline. The reason for beginning with the model and ending with student written outlines and paragraphs and essays was to keep our priorities in perspective: the syntax, grammar, and lexicon material were to be aids, not ends in themselves, as the students concentrated on the particular kind of writing illustrated by the model. This kind of regular focused-to-free practice had several advantages. Because the journal could

dovetail the daily writing into the three-week cycle emphases, there was time to explore various aspects of a given type of writing. With descriptive writing, for example, the students could not only discover the power of sensory details and practice clarifying their ideas with these details for three weeks, but also do the following: in one week, discover various systematic ways to organize spatial material; in another week, describe a scene from one point of view and use prepositions consistently from that point of view; and, in a third week, practice changing the emotional perspective by changing details and words. There was time, also, in one of these weeks to ask for paragraphs dealing with the always interesting expectation-unrealized theme.

Another advantage was being able to respond immediately to the student's needs, one of which was learning strategies to organize their work. The journal assignments provided the students practice in creating paradigms (Lindemann, 1987, pp. 166--170, explains Frank D'Angelo's paradigms) or outlines (Raimes, 1983, pp. 115--138)--both in analyzing a simple paragraph or essay and also in creating their own outlines, which we encouraged the students to keep simple, that is, to use phrases, not sentences, so that the outline could be a real tool, not a burden that took an inordinate amount of time to write. (The focus of these planning assignments was always on finding, stating, and supporting a limited *idea*, not just a term, just as our emphasis throughout the course was always on *developing*--to convince the readers and clarify points for them--the supporting points concretely.) And when we saw that the students were feeling constricted and becoming so concerned about organization that their

papers were shrinking to skeletons, we released them with speed writing (Raimes, 1983, p. 7, and Ponsot and Deen, 1982, p. 38,) for a few minutes in the class periods and also assigned this kind of writing in their journals. The atmosphere brightened since the students clearly enjoyed speed writing and made astonishing progress in both fluency and structural accuracy in a short time. They also discovered something of the recursive (Perl, 1988) nature of writing when they looked for their main concern in a speed writing passage and then wrote about that concern in another speed writing period.

With the journal, I could also create sentence combining exercises related to the kind of writing being practiced-- both with pairs of sentences and with sequences of kernel sentences--for the students to do both in class and out of class. I set some of these sentences in the context of life in China and , especially in the sequences of kernel sentences, based others on sentences from the work of great short story writers, such as Tennessee Williams and Flannery O'Connor. (The first kind were usually easy; the latter were more difficult but were exciting and rewarding because we were working with "real" literature, and we could, in the end, discuss and learn from the choices of these great authors.) These sentence combining exercises, probably more than anything else, helped the students to venture trying their own complex sentences, and their writing soon became more "mature," cohesive, and meaningful.

The journal provided opportunities to work on other needs. Once, when the students were organizing their papers quite well but not supporting their points with many details, their journal assignment sheet included the short essay referred to earlier about a restaurant, entitled "Not

Recommended." As described in the essay, the restaurant had many shortcomings: the waiter was slow about bringing the menu and returning for the order; little on the menu was actually available; the food, when the waiter did bring it, was practically inedible; the prices for each dish did not make sense; and the total bill was impossibly high. The tasks of the students were to discuss this essay together and then to rewrite it, adding specific, convincing details to support the ideas.

Further, both parts of the program--the model and instructional material and the journal assignments--provided training for the inexperienced composition teachers on our team, with whom I met almost every week. Student motivation remained positive, also, since the students found that doing these "journal" assignments not only helped them to raise the level of their English writing ability, but also directly prepared them for the in-class essay. Many, in fact, spent more than the suggested 30 minutes on the daily assignments, except during the mid-term test weeks in their other courses.

In addition to the three-week cycle and the sequence of daily writing assignments, some of us added individual conferences with our students toward the end of the semester, when, with each student, we could look at their past and present writing strengths and needs. These conferences seemed to provide just the help that many of the students needed to "put everything together" in their last papers.

In analyzing, at the end of the semester, what had been achieved,. we were handicapped, of course, in not having had a control section limited to doing only the writing exercises in the reader. Yet it was clear, as we read

the final test essays of the semester, that the students had made substantial progress in achieving the goals of the course. True, their word forms and grammatical choices were not completely accurate. But their writing now appeared, as noted earlier, in a meaningful, pleasing variety of sentence patterns. Furthermore, their papers were coherent, substantive, and clearly organized. Also, the students had developed a surprising degree of fluency. (I have not yet, however, learned the results of the proficiency test.)

Since the university wants to continue using the program, I now have the task of revising it. The changes I am considering include the following.

1. Give more time for "real" journal writing, encouraging letter entries directed to the instructor--a real audience.

2. Include both speed writing and outlining earlier--as tools to develop fluency, discover ideas and specifics, and find form.

3. Provide more practice in discerning the nature of supportive discourse--in various levels of subordinate ideas and specifics.

4. Add more sentence combining and sentence completion practice.

5. Add systematic word form exercises.

6. Teach both the recursive (Perl, 1988) nature of writing and rewriting (Lindemann, 1987, pp. 171--188) more clearly.

7. Review the discourse objectives, and consider moving to a problem-solving or "case" approach (Dow and Ryan, Jr., 1987), while keeping some expressive writing. (For an explanation of the usefulness of expressive writing in helping students to improve their writing, see Fulwiler, 1988.)

8. Add more peer discussion and evaluation--with clear directives.

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A Marking Guide for Essays

Numerical Values

10, 9.5, 9: Excellent to very good; an A+, A, or A- essay

8.5, 8: Good; a B+ or B essay

7.5, 7: Fair; a C+ or C essay

6.5, 6: Poor; a D+ or D essay

5, 4: Very poor; a failing essay

3,2,1: A virtually incomprehensible essay

0: Completely off topic; the essay was obviously prepared before hand, and no attempt was made to discuss any of the assigned topics.

Criteria for an Excellent to Very Good Essay

Content

Deals appropriately with one of the assigned topics

Has both a main point and relevant supporting points

Has a sufficient number of examples and details to be clear and convincing

Does not digress

Includes logical transition terms, pronouns, and conjunctions to make the essay coherent

Has an introduction and a conclusion that are appropriate

Organization

Is clearly divided--and proportioned well--into the basic essay format: having a title, short introduction, body, and short conclusion

Has an effective arrangement of points

Contains well-organized body paragraphs, each of which states and develops a central idea

Language Use

Has complete sentences of varied complexity and accurate word order

Demonstrates mastery of verb tenses, agreement, number, negation, articles, pronouns, etc.

Vocabulary

Demonstrates a range of vocabulary appropriate for the topic

Is precise and idiomatically natural

Has correct word forms

Mechanics

Shows mastery of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing indentation, etc.

Is neatly written and legible